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ABSTRACT

This report from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) provides a profile of the characteristics, qualifications, work experiences, and career plans of teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience. Findings indicate: (1) beginning teachers were more likely to work in suburban systems (50 percent); (2) the majority do not relocate to accept teaching positions; (3) the average first-year salary was $27,667 for those with a bachelor's degree and $30,468 for those with a master's degree; (4) 71% were not fully certified for their main assignments; (5) a higher percentage of beginning teachers who serve students with emotional disturbances enter through alternative certification programs (27%); (6) 84% rate the quality of their teacher preparation programs as exceptional, good, or very good; (7) beginning special educators were less positive than more experienced teachers in characterizing their own job performance; (8) 65% report having a formal mentoring program available to them; (9) teachers were significantly less likely to indicate intent to stay in teaching than their more experienced colleagues, with only 54% planning to stay until retirement; (12) variables that predicted intent to leave teaching included not having any teaching certificate, paperwork that interferes with teaching, and age. (CR)

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SPeNSE Summary Sheet

Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education
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Beginning Special Educators: Characteristics, Qualifications, and Experiences

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The first years of teaching are critical. How beginning teachers cope with job-related demands may determine the kind of teacher they become as well as whether they will be among the many who leave in the early career years. Although we know these early career teachers are at-risk, relatively little is known about beginning special educators. This report provides a profile of the characteristics, qualifications, work experiences, and career plans of teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience[1] from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE).

Where Do Beginning Teachers Work and What Do They Earn?

Beginning teachers are more likely to work in suburban systems (50 percent) than urban (24 percent) or rural (26 percent) settings. The majority of beginning special educators do not relocate to accept teaching positions. Over 80 percent accept positions close to where they live. Sixty-five percent did not move at all, and 16 percent moved fewer than 50 miles. Of those who relocated at all to accept their position, 30 percent moved across State lines.

Characteristics of Beginning teachers :

Percent white:	86
Percent female:	78
Median age:	27
Percent with a disability:	11
Percent with MA:	21

Salaries for beginning teachers vary considerably from district to district, in part as a function of differences in cost of living. The minimum starting salary for first year teachers with a Bachelor's degree is under $15,000. The maximum is roughly $36,000. The average salary for those in their first year of teaching is $27,667 for those with a Bachelor's degree and $30,468 for those with a Master's degree. Beginning teachers work hard for their salaries, spending an average of 55 hours a week on their jobs. This is similar to the number of hours spent by more experienced teachers.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the term beginning teacher refers to those with fewer than 3 years of experience. In a few sections of this report, a sample of teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience is specifically identified because a larger sample was needed for the analysis.

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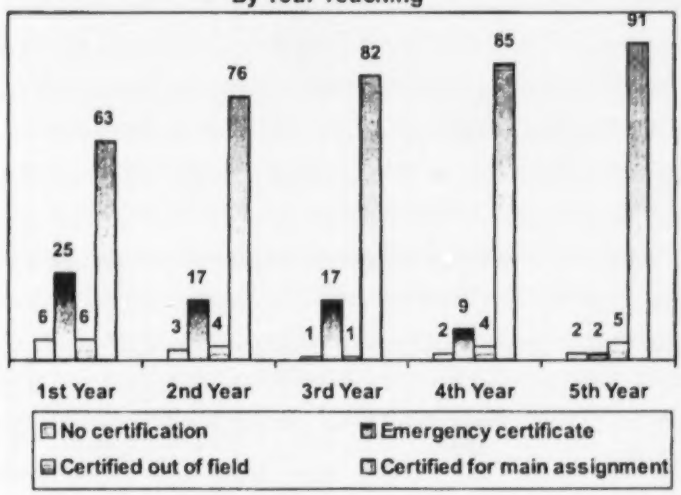
To What Extent Are Beginning Teachers Qualified for Their Positions?

Certification is one aspect of teacher qualifications, but many early career teachers are not fully certified for their main assignments—71 percent compared to 94 percent for special educators who have 3 or more years of experience. Not surprisingly, the percentage of fully certified special educators increases each year over the first 5 years of teaching. Only 63 percent of first-year teachers hold certification for their main assignments. Of the beginning teachers who do not hold certification for their main assignments

- 5 percent are certified out of field,
- 20 percent hold emergency certificates, and
- 4 percent do not hold any teaching certificate.

It is not clear if these beginning teachers eventually earn certification for their positions or leave teaching in disproportionate numbers. The certification status among teachers of students with emotional disturbance (ED) is of particular concern. Over half of those beginning teachers who serve primarily students with ED are not fully certified for their positions. Of those who are not fully certified, 11 percent are certified out of field, 39 percent hold an emergency certificate, and 1 percent do not hold any teaching certificate.

Percent of Special Education Teachers Certified, By Year Teaching



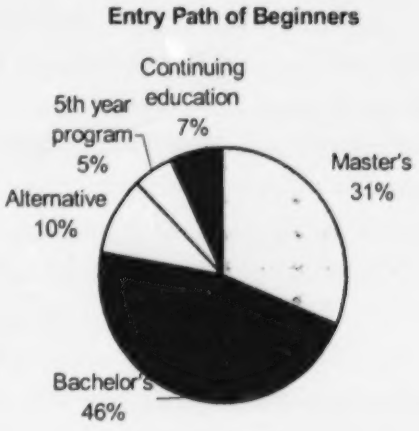
Seventy-five percent of beginning special educators completed a test for certification, while only 56 percent of those with more experience took such a test. Of the beginning teachers who took the test, one-fourth had to take the exam more than once to pass.

Beginning special education teachers take a variety of routes to certification: Bachelor's degree programs, Master's degree programs, alternative certification programs, continuing professional development programs, and 5th year programs. A higher percentage of beginning teachers who serve primarily students with ED enter through alternative certification programs (27 percent) compared to other beginning special educators (10 percent).

Completion of a preservice preparation program is another aspect of teacher qualifications. Overall, beginning teachers give high ratings to their teacher preparation programs;

- 18 percent rate the quality of their teacher preparation program as *exceptional;*
- 66 percent rate the programs as *good* or *very good;*
- 15 percent rate them as *fair;* and
- 1 percent rate them as *poor.*

Although 75 percent of beginning teachers indicate that their preparation program matched the realities of their first school-based assignment, 25 percent indicate it was not a good match. Special education teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience who rate their teacher preparation programs as *very good* or *exceptional* feel more successful than others in providing services to students with disabilities, and they also found their workload more manageable.



Beginning teachers who are certified for their main assignment indicate that they spent an average of 15 weeks student teaching, compared to 11 weeks for less-than-fully-certified teachers. It is likely that fully certified teachers had more opportunities than those who are not fully certified to receive feedback and refine their teaching skills in supervised settings.

Over half of the special education teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience indicate that they had relatively little (36 percent) or no (17 percent) interactions with students who were culturally and linguistically different (CLD) from themselves during their teacher preparation and field-based experiences. This is important because special education teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience who had more exposure to CLD students are significantly more confident in their ability to meet these students' needs.

How Do Beginning Teachers View Their Skills and Abilities?

Beginning special educators were less positive than more experienced teachers in characterizing their own overall job performance. About 64 percent of beginning teachers rate their overall performance as very good or exceptional, compared to 84 percent of those with 3 or more years of experience.

Beginning teachers gave themselves the highest ratings on assessing both appropriate and inappropriate behavior, working with parents, and monitoring students' progress and adjusting instruction accordingly. Beginning teachers gave themselves relatively lower ratings on their skills in accommodating culturally and linguistically diverse students' instructional needs, interpreting the results of standardized tests, and using the professional literature to address

problems in teaching. These were similar to the strengths and weaknesses identified by more experienced teachers.

How Do Beginning Teachers Describe Their Work Assignments?

Although beginning teachers serve significantly fewer students than more experienced teachers, their caseloads are highly diverse. Similar to experienced teachers, about 46 percent of beginning teachers work with students from two or three disability groups, and 31 percent serve students from four to six disability groups. Less than a quarter of beginning teachers serve students from a single disability group. Moreover, 65 percent of beginning teachers serve students from cultural or linguistic groups that are different from their own, and 30 percent serve students who are Limited English Proficient.

In their first years of teaching, beginning teachers assume the responsibilities of their more experienced colleagues. They spend as much time as experienced teachers on many tasks, for example, teaching, lesson preparation, grading, and paperwork. There are only a few exceptions. Beginning teachers spend more time counseling students outside of class, whereas more experienced teachers spend significantly more time communicating with parents or other primary care providers. Beginning teachers are significantly less likely than experienced teachers to make a conscious effort to coordinate the content of their courses with other teachers. Further, significantly fewer beginning teachers have necessary materials available when they need them.

Like their more experienced colleagues, beginning teachers report that they have problems with managing their jobs. Twenty-nine percent of beginning teachers and 24 percent of experienced teachers indicate that workload manageability is a problem. Routine duties and paperwork interfere with the teaching duties of many beginning teachers (72 percent). Surprisingly, a larger percentage of their more experienced colleagues indicate problems with routine duties and paperwork (82 percent).

Although there are no differences between how beginning teachers and experienced teachers perceived their overall school climate (that is, the extent to which they viewed their schools as caring and supportive of students and staff), beginning teachers are significantly less likely than those with more experience to report that they feel included in what goes on in their schools (75 percent of beginning teachers compared to 83 percent of more experienced teachers). Beginning teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience are also less likely than more experienced teachers to feel that they can count on their principals to provide appropriate assistance when a student's behavior requires it. Particular attention needs to be directed at helping beginning teachers feel like they are part of the school and providing assistance with particular needs, like discipline.

What Types of Support Are Helpful to Beginning Teachers ?

Although special educators face many challenges in their first assignments, they are more likely to have support systems available today than in the past. For example, 65 percent of beginning special educators report having a formal mentoring program available to them, while only 28 percent of those with 3 or more years of experience reported having such assistance in

their early years of teaching. Although these formal programs are widely available, beginning special education teachers find the informal assistance they receive from colleagues more helpful than formal programs.

Support Available to Beginning Teachers and the Helpfulness of That Support

	Informal help from other colleagues	Informal help from building teachers	Assistance from consultants or supervisors	Assistance from building administrators	Inservice programs	Formal mentoring program	Regular meetings with new teachers
Support Available	96%	85%	79%	86%	87%	65%	50%
Support Found Helpful	89%	88%	76%	75%	72%	72%	62%

Although the level and helpfulness of support provided to beginning teachers is not significantly related to teachers' intent to remain, the level of support provided during the early years is important. For example, among teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience, those who indicate that they receive higher levels of support are more likely than those with lower levels of support to see their roles as manageable, believe that they are successful in providing education to students with IEPs, and indicate that they can get through to even the most difficult students.

How Long Do Beginning Teachers Intend to Stay and What Affects Their Plans?

Early career teachers are significantly less likely to indicate intent to stay in teaching than their more experienced colleagues. Although 64 percent of experienced teachers plan to stay until retirement, 54 percent of beginners plan to stay that long. About 40 percent of beginning teachers are undecided or plan to stay until something better comes along. The remaining teachers plan to leave teaching as soon as possible. It is interesting to note that a significantly higher percentage of beginning special educators than experienced teachers would choose teaching again (85 percent compared to 74 percent). The higher percentage of beginning teachers who intend to leave does not necessarily reflect dissatisfaction but, rather, the range of other career choices that are at least equally interesting.

Variables that predict beginning special educators' intent to leave teaching include not having any teaching certificate, paperwork that greatly interferes with teaching, and age, with younger teachers being more likely to leave than older ones. Previous research suggests that attrition is U-shaped, with the youngest and oldest teachers most likely to leave (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987). In addition, a positive school climate, when coupled with less interference from routine duties and paperwork, increases the likelihood that special educators will remain. Although overall manageability of the job, entry level salary, and the helpfulness of induction programs predict intent to stay for special educators with more than 5 years of experience, they did not predict intent to stay in the less experienced group.

Working Toward the Future

Teacher preparation programs can help to address some of the issues raised by the findings in this report by considering the following actions:

1. Recruit students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as males;
2. Recruit prospective teachers to work with students with emotional disturbance and increase enrollments in these teacher preparation programs;
3. Form partnerships with school systems to provide coursework and other forms of support for the many beginning teachers who are not certified for their assignments;
4. Create more opportunities for prospective teachers to have experience with students who are linguistically and culturally diverse;
5. Evaluate the extent to which current teacher education curricula provide opportunities for students to develop skills in:
   - accommodating culturally and linguistically diverse students' instructional needs
   - interpreting the results of standardized tests
   - using the professional literature to address problems in teaching;
6. Enhance field-based experiences for prospective teachers to help them acquire practical skills, understand the challenges and rewards of teaching special education (including the range of professional responsibilities), and access the supports available through many school systems to reduce the difficulties experienced by many beginning teachers.

SPeNSE, which was sponsored by OSEP and conducted by Westat, included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators, special and general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraprofessionals in spring and fall 2000. All data presented in this document are national estimates derived from the SPeNSE sample. For more information or a complete reference list, see www.spense.org.

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